

acom

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ating: Excellent

Pros: The best, plus you get a great choice of pens, mouse, airbrush and that funny thing CAD/CAM people use. Transparent overlay, menu buttons.

Cons: the price (especially in Oz), and most graphics software has yet to catch up to its greater capabilities.

Categories: Design Tool

Developer: Wacom, Inc. <<http://www.wacom.com>>

I have been in seventh heaven since acquiring my Wacom Intuos 6" x 8" art tablet several days ago, even given I have had barely enough time away from my other work to have a decent play with this new wonder tool. But I did manage to grab some time off to have a quick foray into using it within MetaCreations' <<http://www.metacreations.com>> excellent and shamefully underhyped vector drawing software, Expression.

Expression, for the multitudes of you who have not been blessed with the pleasure of using it, is an application that might have been the inspiration for Illustrator 8's new built-in brush functions, except that Illustrator's brushes have a generation or two yet to evolve before they reach the level of control you get with Expression's. The downside to Expression is that MetaCreations have not seen fit to update it in years, so it is lacking somewhat in the file export options department, but hey, I like it despite that. And I prefer its brushes to Illustrator 8's.

THE BUNDLED FREEBIES

I did a quick sketchy drawing of my new Wacom in Expression, messed with its natural colouration, the ubiquitous grey/beige/greige that all computermakers except Apple seem to think we love, and you can see the results. I cannot wait until I get the chance

to do some serious graphics work with this thing shortly, and the software that comes with it. Wacom have provided a free full copy of MetaCreations' Painter Classic, the stripped down version of Painter 5.5, and their own PenTools Photoshop format plug-in set.

The PenTools plug-ins are no great shakes, although I can see a use for Metal Leafer if I ever want to do a Greek Orthodox icon or two, and 3D Chisel looks useful for cutting a bas relief effect into a photorealist textured surface, should the need arise. Super Putty is a version of Painter's Distorto brush tool.

The suite's overall purpose seems more to simply give you some toys to play around with as you become acquainted with your new Wacom pen. However, here is the complete list: 3D Chisel, BitBlaster, Brush-On Noise, Despeckler, Metal Leafer, Pen Duster, Super Putty and Virtual Airbrush.

POTENTIAL REGAINED

Wacom were the original developers of the art tablet, way back before 1983 when Azuma Murakami was given the job of systematising Japanese typography at a Japanese daily newspaper. No mean feat given there are some 30,000 characters in the language. This was before the Macintosh and before the mouse was in general use in the world of computing, so Murakami invented his own pointing device.

He co-founded Wacom Company Limited and the company's products gradually found their way on to the European and American CAD and then DTP markets. Wacom's art tablet came to dominate those markets for some time, due to its pen's uniqueness in being cordless, batteryless and pressure-sensitive. In some markets and locations Wacom lost its lead to competitors like CalComp, Kurta and others, but in recent years it appears to have regained its former sales potential.

With the Intuos range of tablets, Wacom has taken back its leading role, and has produced a product whose technical specifications outstrip the needs of the software it is intended for use with. The Intuos' 1024 pressure levels (other tablets are limited to 256 or 512) and greater programmability now enables graphics software developers to take advantage of those traits in future versions of their products. And we gain more control and creative choice.

MY CHOICES

I initially tried out a 9" x 12" Intuos, the model that Wacom are promoting as the standard or median size in the range. There is also the choice of 4" x 5", 6" x 8", 12" x 12" and 12" x 18" versions.

The 9" x 12" allows you to draw at a 1:1 ratio between the tablet's workspace and the screen of your monitor, if it is 17" or over. I chose not to buy that one in the end for two reasons: I have become so accustomed to the much higher geared ratios of a conventional mouse and the Kensington <http://www.kensington.com> Turbo Mouse trackball I bought when I started having RSI problems that the 1:1 ratio felt disconcerting, unnatural even.

To draw a line across the screen meant moving my arm across in an equally large sweep, way beyond the degree of movement a mouse or trackball demands. No doubt I could have got used to it, or chose to activate only part of the tablet's surface by means of the Wacom's control panel, but there was another reason I opted for a smaller model. I have my currently sole computer sitting within a rather generous workstation with a number of levels and shelves and a very large prime worksurface with two slide-out shelves for small peripherals (waiting for the day when another Mac or two joins it).

The 9" x 12" model did not fit safely upon the sliding shelves, nor did it sit comfortably on the large worksurface along with my Apple extended keyboard, mouse, mousepad and trackball. If a tablet was my prime input tool then that would have been another matter altogether, but it simply did not share the space with ease. I like my space around me, a hangover from painting student then studio photographer days.

With the 6" x 8" I can have all my devices in front of me with room to spare, can put the Intuos aside on one of the slide-out shelves and find that the smaller surface of the tablet is no hindrance in using it effectively. The workstation I use by the way is the unfortunately named Jerker, by IKEA <<http://www.ikea.com>>, with a heap of extra fixed and moveable shelves attached to it.

The other benefit of the smaller tablet is that it fits easily into a briefcase, or will once I find a really soft and well-padded case for it and the pen. Imagine then taking it on location along with a PowerBook for a plein-air Painter 5.5 painting session. My Intuos, by the way, makes a terrific alternative to a conventional mouse or trackball for normal pointing and clicking purposes. If you have RSI (otherwise known as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome), I recommend you get yourself a Wacom immediately.

The 4" x 5" model is perfectly OK for non-drawing use, and the way we hold a pen is far more natural than the design of any mouse or trackball not matter how many times the manufacturer prints the word "ergonomic" on the box. (I have only ever encountered one truly ergonomic trackball design, and it is not made for the Mac. Shame, shame, shame on you, Logitech <<http://www.logitech.com>>. You guys think Windows victims give a damn for quality and good design?) There are also cheaper Wacom models available without the high tech specs of the Intuos range.

OTHER CHOICES

With the Intuos you can now own several otherwise identical standard pens that you can set up with varying brush effects courtesy of the included Wacom Tool ID Photoshop plug-in, like having a vase full of different paintbrushes.

There is also an airbrush, which I have not been able to try out yet, the 4D Mouse specially enabled for 3D software which I did try but found I preferred my own combination of Kensington trackball and Intuos pen for software like Painter 3D (and no doubt for Amorphium <<http://www.play.com>> when it arrives). CAD/CAM specialists get their own specialist pointing device, the Lens Cursor.

The Intuos is, without a doubt, the best art tablet on the market and worth every hard-

earned cent. It ain't cheap, but you do get what you pay for.

NEWSFLASH:

Wacom has just announced the availability from March 1999 of its new 4" x 5" Bondi Blue and White crossplatform budget-priced USB PenPartner. What I want to know is, what about Blueberry, Strawberry, Lime, Grape and Tangerine?

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